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Miller at Yugoslav party: 'We have to keep talking'

PEN Pals

Even the most resolutely literate adult must be forgiven for wondering what the writers' society known as International PEN stands for. The initials stand for poets, playwrights, editors, essayists and novelists, while the group itself has been ploddingly devoted to discussing such weary chestnuts as "The Writer and Contemporary Society" and "The New Mobility of Literature." The fact is, PEN doesn't stand very high among serious writers. For the most part, it has become a kind of literary garden club given over to chitchat, trivia and subliterary gossip, and kept going by non-writers and bad writers who can, under its mantle, nurture the illusion that they are the whirling center of things literary.

Against this melancholy background, the 33rd annual congress of PEN in Dubrovnik, Yugoslavia, was astir with new possibilities and fresh prospects for revitalizing the near-moribund organization, reports NEWSWEEK's Paris bureau chief, Joel Blocker. The choice of Yugoslavia as a site, making this the first congress to be held in Eastern Europe since World War II, was a political decision reflecting PEN's desire to involve writers from the Communist countries. For the first time, too, writers from the Soviet Union, which once dismissed PEN as a Western propaganda organ, were in attendance—though only as observers, not as full members. And playwright Arthur Miller's decision to serve as new PEN president was also calculated to improve East-West literary relations, since his standing is high in Russia and Eastern Europe, as a liberal and as a writer.

'Old Ladies': Hopes for the future—for authentic dialogue between writers on both sides of the curtain—ran high. Said Aleksei Surkov, the red-faced, cultured bureaucrat who is a leader of the Soviet Writers' Union: "Now if we can only get a few more real writers into PEN and get rid of some of these traveling old ladies—these tourists—we might get somewhere."

Like all literary gatherings, this one started with strong drink. PEN's Yugoslav hosts threw a free-flowing cocktail party in a spectacularly bizarre setting: a medieval castle atop a craggy precipice high above the warm waters of Lake Bled. And to add a touch of madness, there was a brass band, which announced the arrival of hot hors d'oeuvres with a blaring fanfare and, presumably to make him feel at home, greeted Miller's arrival with high-decibel choruses of "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot."

Poetic Justice: When the congress convened the next morning, English poet and critic Stephen Spender got immediately to business. "We have been discussing this," he said, "for 35 years and we know nothing about the responsibility of the writer ... Present among us are great writers, poets, essayists. Why can't we read poems and extracts from novels and stories to each other?" The audience greeted Spender's remarks with prolonged applause, and thereafter each formal session was graced by the reading of a poem—by Gyula Illyés, Hungarian poet; by the Chilean (and Communist) poet Pablo Neruda, and by Spender himself.

But the real work of the congress took place at the informal round tables, in face-to-face confrontation. The East was represented by Illyés, Polish critic Jan Kott, Soviet authors Leonid Leonov and Vadim Sobko, and Yugoslav Nobel laureate Ivo Andrić; and the West by Miller, Kenyon Review editor and novelist Robie Macauley, Commentary editor Norman Podhoretz, critic-novelist Susan Sontag, Italian novelist Ignazio Silone, France's Manés Sperber and Jean Bloch-Michel, and Spender and Kathleen Nott of England.

"It was remarkable," Miller said, "to see Silone and the East Europeans square off on Marxism without having their ideological baggage destroy communication." An East European delegate echoed the sentiment: "It is good for Western writers to meet us. But it is *essential* for us to make friends and keep contact with them. They are our lifeline to freedom of expression." Even the Russians were enthusiastic. "This is what we want," Surkov said, "to talk to you without the whole world hearing. For us, informal talk, around a table or in the corridors—we love corridors—is the best."

'Third World': Miller was the celebrity of the congress. Everywhere he went, the crowds turned out, the autograph hunters and neck stretchers, as if he were a movie star—which, in a sense, he is. But his purpose is dead serious. "When I was in Moscow and Eastern Europe last February, I talked with many writers and came away feeling that they wanted and needed contact with Western writers. If PEN can't do the job, who can? I want to get more first-rate writers into PEN and more writers from the third world. We have to keep talking."

He sounded these themes again in his concluding address to the congress. "We meet here in disguise," he said, "each of us with his own ideology. We need to explore one another, to doubt ourselves." He made believers of the delegates. "This overgrown literary club, infiltrated by freeloaders and second-raters," an English writer said, "might do some important work. But the real test will come in New York next year, at the 1966 PEN congress. If the Soviets send a topnotch delegation, and the State Department cooperates by waiving visa restrictions for the East Germans and Cubans, we might have a real international literary meeting."

For the first time in a generation, there seemed reason for hope. But it will take a lot of house cleaning and new furniture.